

MUḤAMMAD’S NIGHT JOURNEY IN THE QUR’ĀN

Those not familiar with the Qur’ān may find it difficult to locate the qur’ānic references to the night journey and ascension narratives, for the passages that Muslims have come to interpret as references to these narratives do not necessarily share common qualities or appear in close proximity in the text. There are two primary qur’ānic passages that serve as the major proof texts for the stories about Muḥammad’s night journey and ascension: the first verse of the chapter called the “Night Journey” or “Children of Israel” (*al-isrā’* or *banī isrā’īl*, Q 17:1), and the opening verses of the chapter called “the Star” (*al-najm*, Q 53:1–18). In addition, there are a number of other words, phrases, and entire verses in the Qur’ān that some Muslims have collated into the night journey and ascension accounts. This chapter focuses on those verses that are foundational to an understanding of the development of the night journey and ascension narratives, especially the narratives that come to be associated with Ibn ‘Abbās.

THE NIGHT JOURNEY VERSE

The opening verse of the Night Journey chapter of the Qur’ān (Q 17:1), which one may conveniently call the “night journey verse,” presents something of an enigma, for it offers the most unambiguous reference to a journey by night while simultaneously maintaining a degree of ambiguity about exactly who journeyed and where. Let us examine the verse again:

Glorified be the one who caused his servant to journey by night from the sacred place of prayer to the furthest place of prayer, whose precincts we have blessed, in order to show him some of our signs. Indeed he is the one who hears, the one who sees. (Q 17:1)

The nocturnal foray alluded to in the verse later comes to be known by the technical term “the night journey” (*isrāʿ*), a term that becomes synonymous with the idea of heavenly ascension as well. Most Muslim exegetes understand the verse as a proclamation of the divine voice as it describes the journey of one of God’s servants. The voice shifts between describing the divinity in the third person (“the one” and “his”) to the first person plural (“we” and “our”) and back again, in a style relatively common in qurʿānic discourse.¹ It recounts how one of God’s servants is sent out or taken by another (*asrā bi-ʿabdihī*) on a journey by night.

An important issue left open by the vague language of the night journey verse is the identity of the servant whom the verse describes as journeying by night. Muslim exegetes unanimously understand the reference to “his servant” as an allusion to the Prophet Muḥammad in his role as God’s servant (*ʿabd*). Some non-Muslim scholars point out, however, that the term could also be understood as a reference to Moses.² They argue that the Qurʿān elsewhere connects the key verb in the night journey verse (*asrā*) to the journeying of Moses by night.³ In addition, the verses following the night journey verse (Q 17:1) refer to Moses explicitly: “*And we gave Moses the book, and made it/him a guidance for the children of Israel*” (Q 17:2). Other scholars, such as Angelika Neuwirth, discount the identification of the servant in the night journey verse with Moses, seeing Muḥammad as the most likely referent.⁴ While this debate about the original meaning of the night journey verse has its merits, the present study will not concern itself with the truth or original meaning of the night journey verse, but rather with how the verse came to be interpreted and understood by later Muslims.⁵ Whether or not the first Muslims heard echoes or allusions to Moses in the night journey verse ultimately becomes of little consequence to the history of Islamic ascension literature, since no Muslim source that I have seen raises any doubt that the night journey verse refers to Muḥammad.

Unlike the question of the identity of the servant, one issue that Muslim sources do debate is the question of the origin and destination of Muḥammad’s night journey. The verse states that he was taken from “*the sacred place of prayer*” (*al-masjid al-ḥaram*). This “place of prayer,” which Muslims usually identify with the sacred enclosure in Mecca in general and the central shrine within it known as the Kaʿba in particular, serves as the basic beginning point for the journey in many Muslim narratives. Yet, Muslim narrators differ on the issue of where Muḥammad was when the angels (who are not mentioned in the night journey verse) first came to fetch him for the journey. For some he was

sleeping inside the Ka'ba itself, while for others he was sleeping elsewhere in the sacred enclosure, sometimes at the house of various friends or relatives. The versions of the night journey and ascension narratives that come to be associated with Ibn 'Abbās, the development of which will be the central focus of this study, tend to highlight the statement of Muḥammad's cousin, Umm Hānī' bint Abī Ṭālib (sister of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the latter of whom is the pivotal figure for most Shī'ī Muslims), that Muḥammad had been sleeping in her house that night. While the significance of this detail remains open to debate, the important thing to recognize at this juncture is that even the fairly straightforward phrase "*sacred place of prayer*," which appears a dozen times in the Qur'ān in reference to Mecca,⁶ still remains subject to a range of interpretations in the subsequent *ḥadīth* reports, Qur'ān commentaries, and night journey narratives told by storytellers.

If Muslims interpret the qur'ānic phrase "*the sacred place of prayer*" in diverse ways, one encounters even more debate over the destination of the night journey, the "*furthest place of prayer*."⁷ From the earliest extant Muslim texts, it becomes clear that a group of Muslims from the beginning interpreted the "*furthest place of prayer*" (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*) with the city of Jerusalem in general and its Herodian/Solomonic Temple in particular.⁸ It is equally clear that other early Muslims disputed this connection, identifying the "*furthest place of prayer*" instead as a reference to a site in the heavens.⁹ Eventually a general consensus formed around the idea that Muḥammad's journey did indeed take him to Jerusalem. Even if the night journey verse were thought to refer first and foremost to the terrestrial portion of Muḥammad's journey, nevertheless for centuries scholars and storytellers also continued to connect this verse with the idea of an ascent through the levels of the heavens.

Indeed, how one interprets the location of the "*furthest place of prayer*" in the night journey verse hinges to some degree upon what one sees as the relationship between the terrestrial, horizontal journey to Jerusalem and the celestial, vertical journey to the heavens. The early sources differ on whether the terrestrial and celestial journey are in fact one and the same, or whether they refer to distinct events happening at different times.¹⁰ When treated separately, the terrestrial journey to Jerusalem was frequently designated by the term "night journey" (*isrā'*), while the heavenly journey was frequently designated by the term "ascension" (*mi'rāj*).¹¹ Numerous *ḥadīth* reports and early sources such as Ibn Hishām's recension of Ibn Ishāq's prophetic biography prove, however, that Muslims connected the two journeys into one by the third/ninth century at the latest. After this time, Muslims come to use the terms "night journey" and "ascension" virtually interchangeably, often using either term to refer to a single composite journey over land (to Jerusalem) and through the heavens (to the seventh heaven and sometimes beyond) that Muḥammad experienced on a single night. In other words, the night journey verse, and the word "night journey"

(*isrāʿ*) that derives from the key verb in that verse, both come to be employed by Muslims for the whole of Muḥammad's experiences on the night in question.

According to the night journey verse, the purpose of the journey was for God's servant (Muḥammad) to be shown some of God's signs (*āyāt*). The verse never provides any clues to the content of these signs. The term "sign" (*āya*) appears in the Qurʾān over three hundred times, often referring to something in creation that might remind one of the divine creator. Muslims also use the term "sign" as a technical term for a verse of the Qurʾān. One could imagine various reasons why the night journey verse does not explain the meaning of the signs that Muḥammad was shown. One might surmise that the early audience might have found the reference to signs self-explanatory, or that they would have turned to other verses or sayings to explain the meaning here. Alternatively, Muslims might interpret the lack of specificity in the verse as evidence that the content of the signs was meant to be a secret between Muḥammad and his lord, a position that some early Sufi mystics apparently took.¹² Even though the Qurʾān refrains from further elucidating the meaning of the "signs" mentioned in the night journey verse, later exegetes and storytellers will often supply the details that the Qurʾānic account leaves out. The openness of the references in the night journey verse, references to a servant, places of prayer, and signs, allows later Muslims to interpret this key Qurʾānic verse in a variety of ways.

VERSES FROM THE CHAPTER OF THE OVERTURNING

A passage from the chapter of the Qurʾān known as "the Overturning" (*al-takwīr*, Q 81), an apocalyptic chapter from the early period of Muḥammad's prophetic career, calls on celestial bodies to bear witness to the truth of Muḥammad's revelation in general and his visionary experience in particular. The portion of the chapter that most directly bears upon the narrative of Muḥammad's night journey and ascension is as follows:

- 15) *I swear by the stars that slide,*
- 16) *stars streaming, stars that sweep along the sky*
- 17) *By the night as it slips away*
- 18) *By the morning when the fragrant air breathes*
- 19) *This is the word of a messenger ennobled,*
- 20) *empowered, ordained before the lord of the throne,*
- 21) *holding sway there, keeping trust*
- 22) *Your friend has not gone mad*
- 23) *He saw him on the horizon clear*
- 24) *He does not hoard for himself the unseen. (Q 81:15–24)¹³*

This passage from “the Overturning” invokes the signs (*āyāt*) of the heavens and the earth in a manner characteristic of many Meccan revelations. The ostensible purpose behind the evocation of these signs rests upon their ability to testify to the veracity of the words brought by an “ennobled messenger” (*rasūl karīm*, Q 81:19), often understood as a reference to the angel Gabriel, who in Islamic belief represents the primary intermediary carrying the revelation from the divinity to Muḥammad. This reading of the passage suggests that the verse “He saw him on the horizon clear” (Q 81:23) alludes to Muḥammad’s vision of the angel Gabriel, and one group of Muslim exegetes understand the verse in this way.

However, the title “messenger” (*rasūl*) applies to Muḥammad as well, so perhaps this passage from “the Overturning” has something other than Gabriel in mind. Perhaps Muḥammad himself, for instance, was “ordained before the lord of the throne” (Q 81:20). Indeed, some versions of the night journey and ascension narratives, especially those transmitted in the name of Ibn ‘Abbās, depict Muḥammad as receiving verses of the Qur’ān and/or his prophetic commission at the foot of God’s throne.¹⁴ Moreover, as Josef van Ess proposes, the verse “He saw him on the horizon clear” (Q 81:23) may refer not to a vision of the angel Gabriel but rather to a vision of God.¹⁵ These ideas do not represent the majority opinion about the meaning of these verses from the chapter of “the Overturning,” but they do suggest exegetical trends that the Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narratives will develop in detail.

One sees at the beginning of the above passage from “the Overturning” (Q 81:15–16) a predominance of celestial signs, particularly the stars or planets (*al-khunus*). This emphasis upon the celestial bodies and the skies causes one to wonder whether there may be some connection between celestial signs and prophetic or visionary revelations. Could such a connection explain why Muslim storytellers incorporated images from the above verses in their ascension narratives? This possibility becomes even more intriguing in light of the opening verses of chapter of the Star (*al-najm*, *sūra* 53) to which we now turn.

THE OPENING VERSES OF THE CHAPTER OF THE STAR

As in the night journey verse and the verses from the Overturning chapter cited above, the first eighteen verses of the chapter known as “the Star” (*al-najm*, Q 53) refer to a revelation of God’s signs through a visionary experience. Some Muslims from the first centuries of Islamic history denied that the following verses had much of a connection to Muḥammad’s night journey or ascension, as the compilation of early exegesis by the famous commentator Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) proves.¹⁶ Nevertheless other Muslims, especially those

interested in fleshing out the bare-bones account of the heavenly ascension provided in other sources, found in the following passage a number of rich symbols and ideas.

- 1) *By the star when it sets*
- 2) *indeed your companion is not astray*
- 3) *nor does he speak vainly.*
- 4) *It is nothing less than a revelation revealed*
- 5) *taught to him by a being of intense power*
- 6) *possessing strength. He straightened up*
- 7) *while he was on the highest horizon,*
- 8) *then he drew close and descended*
- 9) *and he was a distance of two bows or closer.*
- 10) *He revealed to his servant what he revealed.*
- 11) *The heart did not lie in what it saw.*
- 12) *Will you then argue with him about what he saw?*
- 13) *He saw him another time*
- 14) *at the Lote Tree of the Boundary*
- 15) *next to the Garden of the Refuge*
- 16) *when the Lote Tree was covered by what covered.*
- 17) *His vision did not stray, nor was it excessive.*
- 18) *He saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.*

As in the passage from the Overturning, these verses from the Star begin with an invocation of the authority of a celestial phenomenon as a sign. As in the night journey verse, here the divine voice speaks in the third person, appearing “to disclose a secret which, apart from [God] Himself, only the Prophet could have known.”¹⁷ In both the passage above from the Star chapter and in the night journey verse, the Qurʾān describes an experience granted to a “servant” (*ʿabd*), understood by Muslims in both cases to be an allusion to Muḥammad. The above passage also shares with the night journey verse the idea that these experiences revealed to Muḥammad some of God’s signs (*āyāt*). In the Star chapter, the signs are further described by the superlative adjective “greatest” (*kubrā*, feminine form of *akbar*). Just as in the previous two Qurʾānic citations, the opening verses from the Star chapter contain a fair amount of ambiguous language.

The identity of the powerful being that the passage describes is especially cryptic, and the interpretation of these verses apparently shifted over time between viewing the being as God and viewing the being as Gabriel.¹⁸ Much about how the verse is read hinges upon how one interprets the ambiguous pronoun “he” sprinkled throughout the following passage: “*He straightened up while he was on the highest horizon, then he drew close and descended and he was a distance of two bows or closer [at which point] he revealed to his servant*

what he revealed" (Q 53:7–10). While some figure was on "*the highest horizon*" (Q 53:7), a phrase reminiscent of the "*clear horizon*" from the Overturning (Q 81:23), some being drew near and revealed something. Those Muslims intent on seeing in this passage a reference to Muḥammad's heavenly ascension could claim that the vision took place while Muḥammad had been raised to the "*highest horizon*." Other Muslims, interpreting the ambiguous pronoun as referring to the angel Gabriel, often explained the verse as a description of Gabriel revealing himself to Muḥammad, perhaps for the very first time and/or perhaps in his immense true form.¹⁹ The former exegetical trend holds particular interest in this study, for those early Muslims who interpreted the above verses from the Star as describing one or more visions of God frequently attributed their ideas to the famous companion of Muḥammad and exegete, Ibn 'Abbās.²⁰ Nevertheless, the qur'ānic reference in this passage remains sufficiently vague to allow for a variety of interpretations of the content of the vision described.

The revelation or inspiration (*wahy*) mentioned in the above passage from the Star chapter does not offer much more specificity to the account, although the passage does appear to suggest that the revelation consisted first and foremost of a vision, since it offers the assurance that Muḥammad's faculties correctly reported this vision: "*The heart did not lie in what it saw*" (Q 53:11). As with the night journey verse, the Qur'ān circumvents stating exactly what was revealed, here offering the even more elusive formulation, "*He revealed to his servant what he revealed*" (Q 53:10). The cautious explanations that Muslims give in many scholarly commentaries and sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) *ḥadīth* reports about this elusive verse tend to understand it as saying either that Muḥammad was granted a vision of Gabriel in his true form or saying that during his journey he was told of the Muslim duty to perform the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) a set number of times per day. Muslim storytellers and more daring exegetes, on the other hand, explain that the vague language in this verse conceals the fact that Muḥammad had enjoyed a vision and conversation with God. The Ibn 'Abbās ascension narratives wax especially poetic on this subject, reading the Star chapter's ambiguous statement "*He revealed to his servant what he revealed*" (Q 53:10) as an allusion to the climactic dialogue and vision at the highest point in Muḥammad's ascension.

Almost all accounts of Muḥammad's heavenly ascension make use of a less ambiguous yet no less mysterious reference from the opening verses of the Star chapter, the reference to a vision at the "*Lote Tree of the Boundary*" (*sidrat al-muntahā*, Q 53:14). Few details about this Lote Tree appear in the Star chapter, aside from the fact that it is located near the equally mysterious "*Garden of the Refuge*" (*jannat al-ma'wā*, Q 53:15), and that a vision took place at the tree when it was covered by something undefined (Q 53:16). Despite the paucity of specific referents in this passage, Muslims early on almost unanimously associated the tree with a heavenly location, and interpreted "*the boundary*" as a

reference to some type of barrier or limit in one of the highest heavens. Most official Muslim accounts describe the boundary as an absolute limit, beyond which created beings cannot cross. In contrast, the more extensive Ibn ʿAbbās ascension narratives portray the Lote Tree as marking a limit that Muḥammad and a few select archangels are allowed to pass beyond, and they depict how Muḥammad leaves Gabriel behind at this point and travels on through yet higher realms to the divine throne itself. The Ibn ʿAbbās narratives exploit the vague language from the opening verses of the Star chapter, attempting to elucidate these otherwise obscure qurʾānic phrases.

Josef van Ess' discussion of the passage "*He saw him another time at the Lote Tree of the Boundary, next to the Garden of the Refuge*" (Q 53:13–15) raises key points about how both early and more recent scholars understood its meaning:

This sounds like a code for paradise, the "*Garden of the Refuge*" being the abode where the blessed will find refuge during or after Judgment (cf. 32:19) and the "*Lote Tree*" marking the boundary of the *sanctissimum* where God Himself resides. But God could descend to it nevertheless, for in those early days paradise was frequently imagined to be on earth. We need therefore not follow the suggestion of early orientalists (starting with Grimme and Caetani up to Richard Bell and Régis Blachère), namely that the "*Garden of the Refuge*" was simply a plantation near Mecca and the "*Lote Tree*" some well-known tree marking the boundary of the Meccan Sanctuary. Muslim exegesis never saw any reason to deny that the encounter took place in paradise, even if it were somewhere on earth. The "*Lote Tree of the Boundary*" became something like the emblem of Muḥammad's ascension; even when reports of the *miʿrāj* make no other reference to *sūrat al-Najm* [the Star chapter], the *sidrat al-muntahā* [Lote Tree of the Boundary] remains as the threshold leading to God's own realm, the seventh Heaven; it is there that the four rivers of paradise originate.²¹

As van Ess states, some Islamicists have argued that the Lote Tree originally referred to a tree located somewhere in Arabia, perhaps marking the boundary of a sacred enclosure.²² He dismisses this mundane identification in favor of a paradisiacal one, accepting the Muslim exegetical consensus that the Lote Tree should be seen first and foremost as a tree of paradise.²³ Van Ess is correct that the vision at the Lote Tree hints at the link between this site and God's abode or presence, and one strand of the Muslim exegetical tradition understands the cryptic qurʾānic reference to the tree being covered (Q 53:16) with the descent of God's presence to it.²⁴ In some ways, however, van Ess' treatment of the Lote Tree in the quotation above misses some subtleties that become especially important to more extensive Muslim ascension narratives. For instance, while

many Muslim ascension accounts do treat the Lote Tree as a tree of paradise the way van Ess describes, those ascension narratives that include a more extensive and detailed tour of the various sections of paradise frequently distinguish between the Lote Tree at the boundary of this realm and a different tree²⁵ in the midst of the paradisiacal garden. Many Ibn 'Abbās narratives, as mentioned above, depict the Lote Tree less as an ultimate destination on the ascension and more as a boundary marker separating the preliminary stages of the journey in which Gabriel accompanies Muḥammad from its final and highest stages where Muḥammad must travel alone. Regardless of whether or not they accept these extra scenes and flourishes, however, as van Ess rightly asserts, for Muslim narrators, "The '*Lote Tree of the Boundary*' became something like the emblem of Muḥammad's ascension." Thus, despite the fact that the opening verses of the Star chapter never say anything explicit to connect them to a heavenly journey or ascension, in the minds of the vast majority of Muslims who comment or elaborate upon these verses, the verses' reference to what are assumed to be heavenly or paradisiacal locations imply such a connection.

THE APPROPRIATION OF TERMS AND PHRASES FROM THE QUR'ĀN

Just as with the "*Lote Tree of the Boundary*" and the "*Garden of the Refuge*," Muslims narrating the story of Muḥammad's ascension lift a series of other terms out of their qur'ānic context and collate them into their narratives. Neuwirth would call ascension narratives that draw upon qur'ānic terms and phrases in this fashion examples of "mythologizing exegesis," for this type of approach "dissolves the qur'ānic statements into its individual elements in order to construct out of these elements side-plots and background images."²⁶ I agree with Neuwirth that these terms have been lifted from their qur'ānic context and applied to a mythological extra-qur'ānic narrative. Such a collation process becomes more and more frequent in later stages of the ascension narratives, as in the portions of these narratives describing heavenly and paradisiacal locations. For instance, a vague qur'ānic oath invoking "*The Inhabited House*" (*al-bayt al-ma'mūr*, Q 52:4) is understood in nearly every ascension narrative as standing for a type of celestial temple located in the seventh heaven,²⁷ often near the Lote Tree. A second tree located in the midst of paradise, mentioned above, sometimes bears the name "Goodness" (*tūbā*), drawn from a vague qur'ānic reference to "goodness" as being the reward for righteous behavior and belief (Q 13:29). Similarly a word is lifted from a qur'ānic passage proclaiming that Muḥammad (and by extension his community) has been given "abundance" (Q 108:1), applying this term to the name of one of the rivers of paradise, "Abundance" (*Kawthar*).²⁸ Even the widely accepted ascension narratives found in the major collections of Sunnī sound *ḥadīth* reports frequently contain interpolations of this kind.

Yet more examples of these types of appropriations of qur^ʿānic terms can be found in the detailed and extensive accounts of Muḥammad’s heavenly journey ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās. For instance, some of the stages of the journey beyond the Lote Tree in the Ibn ʿAbbās ascension narratives are given the name “Heights” (*ʿilliyūn*, Q 83:18–20), a term the Qur^ʿān somewhat puzzlingly links to the books containing the good deeds of righteous individuals. Muḥammad traverses these highest realms without Gabriel, usually carried aloft not by another angel but by a green “cushion” (*raḥraf*, Q 55:76), a term appearing in the Qur^ʿān as one of the comforts of paradise, but here depicted as a type of flying carpet.²⁹ The three central and recurring themes that make up the bulk of Muḥammad’s conversation with God in the Ibn ʿAbbās texts, the “Heavenly Host Debate,” the “Final Verses of the Cow Chapter,” and the “Favor of the Prophets” passages, all derive to varying degrees from explicit phrases in the Qur^ʿān. These appropriations of qur^ʿānic language and imagery may appear artificial or secondary to the narrative,³⁰ yet one should not be surprised that the highest stages of the journey would represent precisely those sections where Muslim narrators would seek to bolster their accounts with proof texts from the Qur^ʿān.

Whether to lend their stories greater legitimacy in the eyes of fellow Muslims, or to add a qur^ʿānic flavor to their mix, early Muslim narrators would often draw words and phrases from the Qur^ʿān to enrich their accounts of these otherworldly experiences through what Neuwirth calls “mythologizing exegesis.” In the absence of passages in the Qur^ʿān presenting detailed descriptions of the places and beings Muḥammad encountered on his heavenly ascension, these narrators would imaginatively construct descriptions on their own, using references from the Qur^ʿān to a lesser or greater degree. The mythological use of the terms sometimes remains consistent with the meaning that the terms have in their qur^ʿānic contexts. At other times, however, it is difficult to see any direct connection between the mythological appropriation of qur^ʿānic references in the ascension narratives on the one hand and their original contexts in the Qur^ʿān on the other. Two of the three key tropes from the Ibn ʿAbbās narrative’s dialogue between Muḥammad and God, the “Heavenly Host Debate” and the “Seals of the Cow Chapter,” illustrate this point.

THE HEAVENLY HOST DEBATE

A passage from the Qur^ʿān that apparently has nothing to do with the night journey and ascension narratives but was subsumed into these narratives appears in an adaptation of a passage from the *Ṣad* chapter of the Qur^ʿān (Q 38:65–70) that I will be calling the “Heavenly Host Debate.” In this passage the divine voice addresses Muḥammad, telling him to speak the following words:

- 65) *Say: I am a warner. There is no god except the one conquering God,*
 66) *Lord of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them, the one who is mighty and the one who forgives.*
 67) *Say: It is a great prophecy,*
 68) *one which you oppose.*
 69) *I did not have knowledge of the heavenly host when they were debating.*
 70) *It was only revealed to me that I am a clear warner. (Q 38:65–70)*³¹

Here the divine voice instructs Muḥammad to tell others that he is merely a warner,³² not someone possessing knowledge of the secrets, such as the secret regarding the details of the debates between angels. From the verses immediately following the above passage (Q 38:71–85), one gets the sense that in the Qur'ānic context the angels were “debating” (*yakhtaṣimūn*) about the creation of Adam and the command to bow down before him. Muḥammad is told to proclaim his ignorance of this event, and then the Qur'ān proceeds to instruct him and his audience about it. On the surface, these verses contradict the notion of there being any connection between this passage and Muḥammad's night journey and ascension, for the verses instruct Muḥammad to deny the claim that he possesses knowledge of hidden mysteries. Nevertheless, some Muslim exegetes will connect these verses with an extra-Qur'ānic conversation between Muḥammad and his Lord, one in which Muḥammad learns from God the details about what the heavenly host debate. He learns in these imaginative passages, which circulate in *ḥadīth* reports and get later incorporated into ascension narratives, that the angels' debate has nothing to do with the creation of Adam, but rather it deals with the definition of pious behavior.³³ From a passing reference to a mysterious debate in the Qur'ān, therefore, an entire scene comes to develop in the oral reports, and this new scene is collated into the divine colloquy section of later ascension narratives.

THE FINAL VERSES (SEALS) OF THE CHAPTER OF THE COW

Another apparently unrelated passage from the Qur'ān that becomes appropriated into the divine colloquy section of a number of later ascension narratives appears in the final two verses that close the longest chapter of the Qur'ān, the so-called seals (*khawātim*) of the chapter of the Cow (Q 2:285–86). Muslims often portray the Cow chapter (*al-baqara*, Q 2) as the paradigmatic chapter revealed to the Muslim community at Medina. Since most Muslims date the night journey and ascension narratives to a time prior to the emigration of the Muslim community from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, one wonders how the final verses

of the Cow chapter could possibly relate to the events of that journey. Such a difficulty is not insurmountable, since the ascension narratives that collate this passage could claim that God gave Muḥammad these verses in the heavens even before they were revealed to him on earth.³⁴ This being as it may, these final two verses or “seals” of the Cow chapter outline the basic elements of Muslim beliefs, followed by a petitionary request for God’s forgiveness and mercy.

285) The Messenger believes what was sent down to him from his Lord. The believers all believe in God, his angels, his books, and his messengers. We do not differentiate between any of his messengers. They say, “We hear and obey.” Forgive us, Lord. To you is the arrival.

286) God does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear. It has what it has earned, and upon it is what it earned. Lord, do not blame us when we forget or err. Lord, do not make us bear a heavy weight like the one you made those before us to bear. Lord, do not make us carry what we are not able. Forgive us and pardon us and have mercy on us. You are our master, so give us victory over the unbelievers.

Authors of the ascension narratives modify this pair of statements and requests, turning them into the report of a dialogue between Muḥammad and God at the highest stage of the ascension. In this intimate and exalted station, Muḥammad’s pleas on behalf of the Muslim community for God’s forgiveness and mercy take on special significance, illustrating the degree to which some Muslims believe that Muḥammad will be able to intercede with God on their behalf. This particular dialogue is not easy to extrapolate from the way the verses appear in the Qurʾān. The petitionary dimension of the end of verse 285 and much of verse 286 possibly led some Muslims to consider these verses as part of the divine colloquy scene in ascension narratives. This “Seals of the Chapter of the Cow” trope becomes one of the most ubiquitous themes in the dialogue portion of the Ibn ʿAbbās ascension narratives, demonstrating how a certain theological issue, in this case belief in Muḥammad’s intercessory power, may have caused some Muslim exegetes and storytellers to incorporate into their ascension tales certain Qurʾānic verses that outwardly bear no relation to the story of the night journey and ascension.

PASSING REFERENCES TO ASCENSION IN THE QURʾĀN

The fact that so many disparate and diverse Qurʾānic references become part of the night journey and ascension narratives in later centuries leads to the question of whether or not the Qurʾān contains even more explicit references to the

idea of a night journey or heavenly ascension. Beyond the night journey verse (Q 17:1), the verses from the Overturning (Q 81:15–24), and the opening verses of the chapter of the Star (Q 53:1–18), all of which employ vague and ambiguous language to describe visionary experiences revealed to God's servant, the verses that mention the concept of ascension in passing seem either ambivalent to or even opposed to the idea of human beings ascending to the sky. The ambivalence or opposition of such verses lead Neuwirth to assert boldly that the Qur'ān offers an "explicit rejection of an ascension" insofar as it would be "inappropriate for a human messenger."³⁵ These verses do not rule out the idea that Muḥammad experienced a heavenly journey, however, but rather dwell on the idea that God refuses to provide explicit proofs to the unbelievers, for they would refuse to accept these proofs even were such proofs to be given to them.³⁶ The majority of these passages express the sentiment that unbelievers would not believe in God and the message of the Qur'ān, even were they themselves to be brought up into the heavens.

In addition to these qur'ānic passages that appear to reject the notion that it befits a human being to ascend to heaven, one finds allusions to the idea that God's enemies attempt to ascend to the heavens to overhear what those in the upper realms are saying. For instance, the following passage describes how certain satanic rebels attempt to spy on the upper realms, and how they are driven away to prevent them from doing so:

- 6) *We decorated the first heaven³⁷ with the decoration of heavenly spheres*
- 7) *protected from each rebel satan.*
- 8) *They do not hear the heavenly host and are pelted from each side,*
- 9) *driven off. They will [all] face continual torment*
- 10) *except for the one who steals a listen, for a piercing flame follows him. (Q 37:6–10)*

This passage presumes a certain knowledge of the mythological context that it does not give here. While intriguing parallels between the idea in the above passage of repelling an invasion of heaven and similar concepts in Jewish folklore and ascension narratives come to mind,³⁸ in the qur'ānic text the story of the rebellious angels—discussed above with regard to the Heavenly Host Debate—seems to provide the most fitting context. Note the parallel between the language in Q 37:8 above and the Heavenly Host Debate passage (Q 38:65–70): In the former, the rebel powers attempt to listen in on the discourse of the heavenly host; in the latter, Muḥammad is instructed to deny knowledge of the discourse of the heavenly host. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, not only rebellious satans but also rebellious people attempt to hear the heavenly voices or at least claim to have done so. The Qur'ān instructs Muḥammad to ask his adversaries, "Do they

have a ladder upon which they can hear? Let any who have heard bring clear authority (*ṣultān mubīn*)” (Q 52:38). Once again an allusion to heavenly ascension, here evoked through a reference to a ladder (*sullam*), contains a negative connotation, describing how impostors and enemies attempt to ascend through their own power in order to spy on the heavenly realm.

While the Qur^ʿān rejects any notion that the enemies of God can succeed in ascending to the heavens, just as it rejects the idea that an ascension would change the mind of unbelievers, nevertheless it does insist on God’s supreme authority to allow beings to ascend from the earth up to the heavens and to descend from the heavens down to the earth. In these assertions, one finds some of the few instances in the Qur^ʿān in which the root of the Arabic word *mi^ʿrāj*, namely *ʿ-r-j*, appears.³⁹ Two separate verses in the Qur^ʿān proclaim that God “*knows what goes into the earth and what exits from it, and what descends from the sky [heaven] and what ascends to it*” (Q 34:2, 57:4). The implication of this proclamation is not only that God has knowledge of all things, but also that God also allows for these movements to take place. The chapter of the Qur^ʿān known as “the Steps” (*al-ma^ʿārij*, Q 70) is so called because it contains a description of God as “*Possessor of the steps*” (*dhū al-ma^ʿārij*, Q 70:3), or translated differently, “*Lord of the ascensions.*”⁴⁰ The same Qur^ʿānic passage in which this epithet appears goes on to say, “*To him the angels and the spirit ascend, on a day whose span is fifty thousand years*” (Q 70:4). This verse from the chapter of the Steps bears comparison to the verses from the chapter of Destiny (Q 97), in which the angels and spirit (*rūḥ*) descend on a night “*better than a thousand months*” (Q 97:3–4).⁴¹ In each case time collapses during the movement of the angels and spirit between heaven and earth, evoking a hyperbolic multiplication of the span of earthly time that expresses the magnitude of the event.⁴² God commands his faithful heavenly servants to descend and ascend, just as he insures that his enemies will not succeed in doing so without his bidding.

Granted, these Qur^ʿānic references detail the movements of angels and the spirit, and do not contradict Neuwirth’s assertion that the Qur^ʿān offers an “explicit rejection of an ascension” insofar as it portrays such an ascension as “inappropriate for a human messenger.”⁴³ In fact, depending on how one interprets the key passages that were introduced above, the night journey verse (Q 17:1), the verses from the Overturning (Q 81:15–24), and the opening verses of the chapter of the Star (Q 53:1–18), one may defensibly argue that not a single passage in the Qur^ʿān supports the idea that Muḥammad ascended up through the heavens and back, all within a single night. A reference to a terrestrial journey in the night, perhaps with a destination of Jerusalem, could certainly be seen in the night journey verse, but according to Neuwirth’s study that uses the Qur^ʿān to explicate the Qur^ʿān, one finds little support for the concept of Muḥammad’s heavenly journey in the text of the Qur^ʿān itself.

Even if one accepts that the Qur'ān offers little explicit support for the idea of Muḥammad's heavenly ascension, one cannot deny that, despite such lack of support, Muslims in the first three centuries of Islamic history not only accepted that Muḥammad experienced such a journey but also endeavored to tell the story of this experience and to explain its significance. Indeed, built into many Muslim extra-qur'ānic accounts of Muḥammad's journey, including those ascribed to Ibn 'Abbās, is the idea that accepting the truth of Muḥammad's testimony about the journey serves as a test of faith for Muslims. From this point of view, the qur'ānic verse "*We only made the vision that we revealed to you as a strife (fitna) for people*" (Q 17:60), when understood as a reference to Muḥammad's journey, helps to explain why the Qur'ān does not recount the story in a more explicit fashion. Moreover, it can also be used to explain why Muslims argue over the meaning and significance of Muḥammad's journey.⁴⁴

Unlike Neuwirth's attempt to examine "internal qur'ānic commentary,"⁴⁵ or any method claiming to uncover the original sense of the qur'ānic text, this study focuses on the historical development of the mythologizing trends within the vast storytelling genres of later centuries. That is, instead of endeavoring to explain the most correct interpretation of the qur'ānic verses, this book traces how Muslim interpretations of these verses, especially those associated with the Ibn 'Abbās ascension narrative, take shape over time. Having examined some of the most important qur'ānic material on which these narratives will draw, the following chapters explore the extra-qur'ānic Muslim accounts of Muḥammad's journey, beginning with the earliest version of the ascension narrative ascribed to Muḥammad's cousin and companion, Ibn 'Abbās.